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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**MAINTAINING REGIONAL STABILITY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC: UNITED
STATES PACIFIC COMMAND THEATER SECURITY COOPERATION
STRATEGY WITH CHINA**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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ABSTRACT

China's continuing economic and military growth has many US military strategists preoccupied with China's ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States' recent announcement of a strategic pivot toward the Asia-Pacific region confirms the concern with China's uncertainty on the global stage. However, China's National Defense in 2010 white paper suggests China is on a "path of peaceful development" and is committed to a "harmonious world" based on cooperation and trust. Analysis indicates that a fruitful U.S.-China relationship can be maintained in order to prevent incidents or major conflict that could destabilize the Asia-Pacific region. This paper explains that anything less than a comprehensive Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) plan with China may result in increased tension between the two nations and cause future miscommunication and miscalculations that may disrupt the region. It also provides recommendations for Commander, United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) to implement a four-phase TSC plan designed to enhance the current relationship between the two countries ensuring stability in the Asia-Pacific theater of operations.

INTRODUCTION

Our Nation seeks a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship with China that welcomes it to take on a responsible leadership role. To support this, the Joint Force seeks a deeper military-to-military relationship with China to expand areas of mutual interest and benefit, improve understanding, reduce misperception, and prevent miscalculation.¹

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As the United States (US) military ends its decade of war with an unconventional enemy and prepares to draw down military forces, it is important that the Navy's strategy support the emerging Chinese Navy. China's development of a sophisticated maritime force with asymmetric capabilities and vast economic growth are alarming. Therefore, it is no surprise that the U.S. is refocusing its efforts toward the Pacific theater. The "re-strategy" toward the Pacific announced by US Army General Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), confirmed the U.S.'s growing concern over China's intentions.² Although China is not considered an enemy to the U.S., its grand strategy intentions are unclear, inviting apprehension from the U.S. and other regional countries. The recent disputes with countries in the region over fishing and resources, and the build up of military capabilities, suggest China is developing a maritime force to prevent open access to maritime commons in the South China Sea. If this occurs, there is potential for major conflict to erupt and destabilize the region.

However, *China's National Defense in 2010* insinuates the country is on a "path of peaceful development" and is committed to building a "harmonious world" with the help of

¹ Chairman, US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America*. (Washington, DC: CJCS, 2011).

² Tyrone C. Marshall Jr, "Dempsey Discusses US-China Relations, Middle East Challenges," *Defense.gov*, 19 February 2012, accessed 26 March 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=67250>.

traditional and rising countries. China's defense white paper further implies the country is in pursuit of cooperation along with peace. It states: "China will hold high the banner of peace, development and cooperation...cooperative security and common security...and endeavor to foster, together with other countries, an international security environment of peace, stability, equality, mutual trust, cooperation and win-win."³ With both countries willing to pursue a fruitful relationship, a comprehensive "whole of government" engagement strategy with China should be developed in order to maintain regional stability. Specifically, US Pacific Command (USPACOM) should develop and implement a robust TSC plan with China that is based on engaging the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), conducting multilateral TSC with allies in the region to influence China, and cultivate the PLAN's legitimacy through military-to-military cooperative training opportunities.

RIISING PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY NAVY (PLAN)

In order to comprehend China's maritime strategy, it is important to understand the development of the PLAN. China's quest to operate in the maritime environment can be traced back to the 7th century. However, it wasn't until the Ming period (1368-1644 A.D.) when China explored the open ocean.⁴ Historically, China concentrated on continental development and land-based power rather than the maritime environment. During Emperor Yongle's reign, China projected its naval power during voyages around Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.⁵ The voyages were under the command of Admiral Zheng He and represented China's power projection "in order to impress, or if need be to overpower, the

³ China's National Defense in 2010, 5.

⁴ Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Seapower* (Maryland: United States Naval Institute, 1982).

⁵ Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433* (New York: Pearson Education, Inc, 2007).

local authorities.”⁶ However, the voyages were short-lived and after just seven voyages, China abandoned operating in the maritime domain. China’s reluctance to build an effective naval force continued to present itself throughout history. The inadequacy of China’s navy was first recognized when they were defeated during the Sino-Japanese Wars of 1894-1895 and 1937-1945. Naval operations continued to play a minor role in China’s grand strategy until the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the creation of the PLAN in 1949.⁷

Since the PLAN’s inception, it has evolved, along with China’s maritime strategy, into an effective force that can challenge any modern day navy. According to Michael Chase, China’s maritime strategy has progressed from a “near coastal defense” to a “near seas, active defense” to the present day’s strategy to conduct “far seas operations.”⁸ However, the PLAN has yet to perfect the latter. “The PLAN endeavors to accelerate the modernization of its integrated forces...and develop its capabilities in conducting operations in distant waters,” claims China.⁹ For this reason alone, USPACOM should engage the young PLAN to develop a modern navy, gain a global partner, and maintain world stability. However, a wide-ranging security cooperation strategy with the PLAN has inherent risk to US national security.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT: REPERCUSSIONS OF A COMPREHENSIVE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Assisting China with modernizing the PLAN could have serious implications to the US’s national security and possibly destabilize the Pacific region. Critical analysis is

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Office of Naval Intelligence, *The People’s Liberation Army Navy: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics* (Suitland, MD: ONI, 2009), 3-4.

⁸ Michael S. Chase, *China’s Growing Naval Power* (Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, 2010).

⁹ China’s National Defense in 2010, 9.

essential as China continues to be less open of its intentions in the Pacific region and the international stage. Until China is forthcoming with its true military objectives, it is imperative the US Navy refrain from enabling the modernization of the PLAN. The number of territorial disputes over fishing and resource rights in the South China Sea and the infinite stratagem of Taiwan unification are troubling and suggest future conflict in the region is very likely. The improved military capability the PLAN receives from USPACOM could endanger the region's status quo. Providing the PLAN with critical training to boost wartime capability could speed up China's attainment of a modern navy. Consequently, China will possibly take advantage of its military gains received from military-to-military engagements with the U.S. and may attempt to reunify Taiwan and challenge regional hegemony.

Anything less than comprehensive security cooperation with the PLAN could be detrimental to a healthy relationship and may destabilize the region. Choosing to adopt a limited TSC strategy with the PLAN may invite future miscalculation and misunderstanding. A limited TSC plan may send an unintended signal that the US Navy is attempting to contain the PLAN. By the US Navy conducting aggressive security cooperation with other countries in the region may raise suspicion from the PLAN. According to Dennis Hickey and Lilly Lu, "Without mutual trust in a relationship, the PLAN will be uncomfortable with or not willing to engage in cooperative activities that would seem of value to the United States."¹⁰ Furthermore, a limited TSC plan will prevent the U.S. from deriving any strategic intentions from the PLAN.¹¹

¹⁰ Kevin Pollpeter, *U.S. – China Security Management: Assessing the Military-to-Military Relationship*. (Santa Monica, CA, Rand Corporation, 2004), 89.

¹¹ Dennis V. Hickey and Lilly Kelan Lu, *The Future of Sino-American Military Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities*. (Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2008), 230.

A comprehensive TSC plan with China may provide China with greater knowledge of US military strategy. Due to the complex planning required to conduct military exercises, bilateral exercises with China could expose certain US Navy capabilities inherent to successful war fighting. Should China attain this knowledge, they may be able to challenge the US Navy during any future conflict. Cross-pollination of mid-level grade military personnel will perhaps have a similar effect. Military exchanges may expose PLAN personnel to certain tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) of the US Navy. The PLAN may then develop its own procedures to produce the capability to offset the effective use of US naval strategy.

If the U.S. provides the PLAN with information and training to modernize its navy and arm it with war fighting capability, it will cause friction with neighboring countries in the region. Surrounding countries are already fearful from the PLAN's rise in military capability. This fear can further be exacerbated if the US Navy assists the PLAN in modernization. This will likely prevent effective cooperation with China from other Asian countries that have a history of disputes with China. As a result, the occurrences of disputes could be more frequent and may cause conflict instead of being resolved amicably. However, the information shared with China is accessible to other Asian nations through open-source documents and materials.

The information sharing to be conducted during a robust TSC engagement with China is available in open-source avenues and does not pose a threat to US national security. As mentioned above, the PLAN is seeking to advance its logistical and joint capabilities. Specifically, the PLAN wishes to improve in areas of doctrine, joint command structure and

force sustainment during long-time maritime operations.¹² The majority of the information that can be collected by the PLAN is on the Internet. The amount of service and joint doctrine on the Internet is insurmountable and the PLAN could easily attain the majority of US doctrine and then implement it into its own service doctrine.

During current bilateral and multilateral exercises with countries, foreign personnel are granted access to only those shipboard workspaces and offices required to successfully accomplish the mission. An effective TSC strategy with the PLAN would be similar and all classified sensitive material would be restricted using the current US Navy information controlling procedures. Moreover, controlling the information more than described above may hamper the modernization of the PLAN and indicate to China that the U.S. is trying to contain them and may prevent further collaboration.

ENGAGEMENT NOT CONTAINMENT

A comprehensive USPACOM TSC plan designed to engage the PLAN could mature the U.S.-China naval relationship and reduce the likelihood of future maritime incidents and miscalculations in the region. As stated in Joint Publication 3.0, “Military engagement is the routine contact and interaction between individuals or elements of the Armed Forces of the United States and those of another nation’s forces...to build trust and confidence, share information, coordinate mutual activities, and maintain influence.”¹³ Security cooperation entails military engagement and may include specific mission areas.¹⁴ The recent US shift in focus toward China suggests that a robust security cooperation and military engagement plan should be adopted to maintain stability in the region. Such a plan could provide the U.S. with a better understanding of China’s recent surge in military development.

¹² China’s National Defense in 2010, 11.

¹³ Joint Publication 3.0, V-10.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Although China has been constructing a sophisticated navy for nearly two decades, it is far from being a “distant water” navy that is able to sustain operations on the high seas. In the recent defense white paper, China maintains its commitment to developing a PLAN that has the capability of “conducting operations in distant waters.”¹⁵ However, their quest to conduct sustained operations at sea faces serious challenges. As such, PACOM has the opportunity to engage the PLAN and conduct coordinated operations that aim to build a partnership based on information and capability sharing. China’s “distant water” navy, while still immature, continues to search for opportunities to develop their underway logistical, amphibious operations, and joint operations capabilities.¹⁶ Providing China assistance to achieve these capabilities may have beneficial strategic effects for both the U.S. and China.

For the U.S., comprehensive military engagement with China, led by USPACOM, could provide valuable training to the PLAN in order to achieve these capabilities. Naval cooperation will demonstrate to China that the U.S. is not attempting to contain their growing navy. On the contrary, the military engagements instill mutual trust and confidence between the two services that will likely further strengthen the partnership. Thus, by tightening the relationship, assumptions may be limited, military intentions less ambiguous, and future disputes could be settled using peaceful means. An open engagement forum may also be an effective deterrent. Hickey and Lu write, “The more China learns about America’s awesome military power, the less likely is the chance that it will seek to challenge the U.S. on the battlefield.”¹⁷ Because the PLAN remains an inferior force when compared to the US Navy, the gap across the military capability spectrum will be evident and could prevent the PLAN from challenging the US Navy. The PLAN has made vast improvements in

¹⁵ China’s National Defense in 2010, 9.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷ Hickey and Lu, 234.

modernizing its highly capable force, but the People's Republic of China (PRC) has identified challenges, such as limited air defense capability of their destroyers and poor integration of the submarine force during operational exercises.¹⁸

For the PLAN comprehensive security cooperation with the US Navy could be beneficial. First, it may supply China's navy with the knowledge to modernize the PLAN.¹⁹ In other words, "Chinese officers [will] gain a knowledge of American military doctrine, operations, training, administration, etc."²⁰ At the same time, "This can be used both to gauge American military power and China's own efforts at military modernization and thereby reduce the chances of miscalculation and conflict."²¹ Moreover, by assisting in modernizing the PLAN, USPACOM sends a clear message that the U.S. does not wish to contain China, but help the PLAN in becoming a "distant water" navy and an improved international partner.

The 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) adopts a grand strategy to shape the international order through leadership to overcome the global challenges of the 21st century. In the 2010 National Security Strategy, President Obama announced, "Our military will continue strengthening its capacity to partner with foreign counterparts, train and assist security forces, and pursue military-to-military ties with a broad range of governments."²² Such a strategic statement is more reason for USPACOM to develop an aggressive and robust TSC plan with China. Having the USPACOM's strategic and operational TSC objectives aligned with the NSS will supply the needed energy and collaboration to execute

¹⁸ Office of Naval Intelligence, 44.

¹⁹ Hickey and Lu, 235.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² U.S. President, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2010).

such a sensitive endeavor. According to Pollpeter, previous military-to-military activities with China failed due to inefficient planning preventing any benefits for the US military.²³ To prevent future planning inefficiencies, having both USPACOM and Washington invested in the effort, may double the planning and coordination efforts needed to execute a successful engagement plan. Also, engaging both China and the PLAN at the highest levels will reinforce to China and neighboring countries the commitment of the U.S. to “continue to pursue a positive, constructive, and comprehensive relationship with China.”²⁴

MULTILATERAL THEATER SECURITY COOPERATION PLAN WITH REGIONAL PARTNERS

Conducting multilateral TSC engagements with allied countries in the Pacific can influence China to remain a peaceful international partner and deter surrounding nations from acting against China. The growing concern from Asian countries towards China and its economic and military expansion has the potential to destabilize the Pacific region. Hence, the U.S. could, “As a convener, our relationships, values, and military capabilities provide us, often uniquely, with the ability to bring others together to help deepen security ties between them and cooperatively address common security challenges.”²⁵ As a “convener,” the US Navy can structure cooperation engagements with multiple countries from within the region. These engagements will likely establish relationships and promote collaboration from all Asia-Pacific countries participating, including China. Dialogue pertaining to differences in culture, service traditions, and military capabilities may form. As these engagements continue and relationships mature, China may be less inclined to act aggressively against

²³ Pollpeter, 69.

²⁴ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 43.

²⁵ The National Military Strategy of the United States of America, 1.

regional neighbors during disputes. Moreover, the multilateral engagements may prevent any miscalculations and incidents between the countries.

Multilateral cooperation with the PLAN could reduce the likelihood of regional navies from acting with aggression during any quarrels. Asian countries undoubtedly have different security concerns, traditions and customs that can cause friction. When mutual interests are absent from relationships, conflict may occur. To prevent regional disorder, the U.S., as the security guarantor, can help forge cooperative dialogue to settle any grievances from regional navies against the PLAN. Moreover, as security guarantor, the US Navy will also signal to regional partners that the U.S. remains committed to order and peace in the region.

The US Navy can maintain regional harmony by preventing countries in the region from appeasing China. It is understandable that developing countries may side with a growing country like China. A developing country who has or who will have economic links with China may adjust its national interest to appease China as insurance for future economic transactions. If China is able to manipulate countries in the region, it will likely destabilize the region and disrupt the cooperation among the Asian countries. Conflict between less accommodating countries and the PLAN may be likely. With the US Navy involved in multilateral TSC, it can shape regional order by thwarting any attempt by China to engage in any zero-sum game tactic that may destabilize the peaceful order.

China is seeking to conduct more multilateral security cooperation that concentrates on combating mutual threats in the region to build stronger cooperation efforts. During the 9th International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Asian Security Summit, General Ma Xiaotian announced during his speech:

Only when Asia-Pacific countries unite as one to tackle these threats can common security be achieved. Needless to say, countries have different security concerns and difference capabilities in addressing common security threats. But all countries, big or small, strong or weak, are equal players in maintaining common security. In the process of countering common security threats, countries should accommodate each other's concerns and build security partnerships on an equal footing.²⁶

This revelation presents USPACOM the opportunity to conduct multilateral security cooperation efforts to build upon existing partnerships. Engagements such as these are even more appealing because there is a common and tangible adversary. Take anti-piracy and counter-terrorism as examples. Because there is a common threat, countries will be more invested toward cooperation to complete the missions successfully. Moreover, conducting multilateral exercises against common threats will build alliance cohesion and credibility to the PLAN that could further develop a cooperative partnership between the two navies.

LEGITIMACY OF THE PLAN

Cultivating the PLAN's legitimacy through military-to-military cooperative training is essential to long-term security in the Pacific region. PACOM's development of a TSC plan that allows the PLAN to lead certain training opportunities and major exercises will likely lend credibility to the PLAN. Some argue that China's lack of military transparency is mostly due to their perception of being an inferior force when compared to the U.S.. A series of bilateral engagements with the PLAN designed to empower their growing naval force will send a strong, clear signal to China of the PLAN's credibility of being an effective naval force. Since it is fair to say that the PLAN will conduct operations that are guided by national interests, having the PLAN lead bilateral exercises could also provide further insight of the PLAN's growing military capabilities. As stated above, China's regional intentions remain ambiguous. Conducting bilateral exercises will help the US Navy assess the PLAN's

²⁶ General Ma Xiaotian Deputy Chief of General Staff, People's Liberation Army, China (address, The 9th Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 05 June 2010).

maritime operations ambitions. It may allow the US Navy to see how the PLAN deploys forces and conducts military operations at sea. Furthermore, similar to the cooperative multilateral strategy, bilateral engagements will allow the U.S. to influence China of U.S. national and regional interests. This strategy is not designed to impose our democratic belief system, but instead is a way to stress the importance of a cooperative strategy in order to coexist in an environment of common security interests.

Lending credibility to the PLAN will promote regional acceptance from neighboring countries in the region. Maintaining a healthy relationship with the other Asian countries is crucial to a successful U.S.-China cooperation plan. By the U.S. demonstrating the acceptance of the PLAN, it may help shape the foreign perception. In doing so, the closer cooperation will reduce the number of future incidents or disputes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Underpinning an effective TSC plan with China are consistent engagements that demonstrate USPACOM's commitment to building a partnership with China that is based on trust and not competition for regional hegemony. A healthy relationship between the two navies will promote collective security in the Asia-Pacific region and help diffuse any misunderstandings or miscalculations from both parties. Therefore, USPACOM should develop a four-phase TSC plan designed to engage the PLAN and regional countries to ensure regional stability. The tiers of the plan effectively build upon the rapprochement between the countries. If executed, the TSC plan may enhance existing partnerships, build new relationships with developing countries and diffuse assertive behavior to maintain good regional order.

The first phase should start at both the tactical and operational levels. According to the 2011 Annual Report to Congress, the last time both China and the U.S. participated in any military-to-military engagement was in 2007 during the Western Pacific Naval Symposium.²⁷ The first phase should consist of a formal meeting to be attended by officers from the operational level. During this meeting, the officers establish relationships with their counterparts. Simultaneously, it sets the foundation of promoting a security cooperation based on mutual respect. Following this successful encounter, USPACOM should initiate a formal capability and limitation brief to be given from both services. Officers from both the operational and tactical levels should attend the briefing. Officers from the tactical level attend for two reasons. First, the brief would permit the opportunity to interact with their counterparts and begin a formal relationship. Second, the officers at the tactical level will be mostly involved in the initial team-building exercises like Search and Rescue (SAR) and Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) operations. Building a personal relationship at the tactical level will help prevent future miscommunication or miscalculation in the maritime environment because they will have their personal relationships at stake. Once both services are comfortable with operating together during these exercises, phase two begins.

The second phase consists of more operational level exercises and engagements. Building upon the relationship derived from the phase one exercises, planners from the US Navy and the PLAN will plan bilateral exercises. These exercises should initially consist of peacekeeping operations and later expand to Anti-piracy and Counter-terrorism exercises.

²⁷ U.S. Department of Defense. *Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011*. (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2011).

Eventually, the exercises should be led by the PLAN. During this phase, USPACOM can provide the PLAN with knowledge and training for those capabilities that PLAN is striving to attain. Again, this will send a clear message to the PLAN that USPACOM is willing and determined to effectively work together. After the PLAN is comfortable, the second phase will again expand to conduct multilateral exercises with the U.S. and neighboring countries.

The third phase of a comprehensive TSC plan with China consists of scheduled port visits and the cross-pollination of Sailors from both navies during exercises. The scheduled port visits provide the opportunity for both navies to interact with the local communities and experience the traditions and cultures from their counterparts' countries. The importance of these port visits will be the better understanding of each other's diverse background and cultures. Scheduled personnel exchanges may also further enhance the relationship between the navies. Similar to the end state of port visits, the exchange program provides the PLAN and the US Navy the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of each other's navies. It will provide insight into their service's culture and expose them to their counterpart's daily routine.

The fourth and final phase of a TSC plan with China consists of military visits and personnel exchanges between the service academies to broaden the U.S.-China relationship. The military visits should entail bilateral and multinational conferences and symposiums covering various subject areas. The structure of these conventions would be to discuss a myriad of naval topics, such as ideas of improvements and achievements that can be shared between the navies. The intent is not to discuss the U.S.-Sino relationship specifically, but to advance face-to-face interaction and foster military relationships. The second and important component of the final phase is the reciprocal exchanges of military personnel between the

professional military and service academies. Attending the various education programs should be junior officers and mid-grade personnel. The rising leaders will experience each other's inherent service culture while receiving professional development. Inherent to the military education exchanges are the achievement of the additional goals of service networking and exposure to differing perceptions of common ideologies from various countries. The knowledge and experience acquired will promote mutual understanding and cooperation.

CONCLUSION

After the Cold War, the U.S. and China have struggled to maintain a stable and consistent relationship. The ever-changing and sensitive cooperation between the two countries, which began during the Cold War, has developed into a "partnership." However, events like the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and the 2001 EP-3 aircraft incident have exacerbated the tension between the two countries and further strained the relationship. Since 9/11, the relationship has changed for the better and both countries have been building upon a strategic cooperation that shows signals of a long-term and fruitful relationship. The common national interests shared by the U.S. and China in the Asia-Pacific region require both countries to cooperate to avoid future conflict and misunderstandings.

However, conflict between the two nations is not inevitable. Both countries have formed strategic policies to promote an effective security cooperation plan. These policies instill trust and confidence and the willingness for both countries to work together and promote regional order. A co-created strategic and operational level TSC plan designed to engage China and regional countries will build lasting relationships that may eventually end traditional regional disputes. Specifically, to maintain peace, it is crucial that USPACOM, in

concert with a “whole of government” approach create an effective, comprehensive TSC plan that engages and influences China’s navy while protecting the mutual interests of all countries in the Pacific theater. Working together, the US Navy and the PLAN can establish and maintain a valuable relationship that promotes mutual understanding and regional order.

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